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ABSTRACT

Past research has examined middle adulthood as a developmental process with outcomes predictive of development into old age. A study was undertaken to explore adult psychological and career development from an ecological perspective taking into account factors that influence and modify self-perception, values, identity, and social interaction. A survey assessing demographic, attitudinal, marital, parenting, physiological, psychological, spiritual, and career features of middle-aged men was completed by 584 men between the ages of 38 and 49 who were employed in middle management positions. The results confirmed three hypotheses: (1) by midlife only a minority of middle managers still maintain a dream of top occupational attainment; (2) the majority of middle managers shift their achievement motivation from job advancement to job mastery within their current occupational niche; and (3) the majority of middle managers experience some midlife transition stress which is buffered by available and satisfactory social support. The hypothesis that attention to community service would increase during midlife was not supported. Five factors were identified as possible precursors of successful aging attitudes. The results suggest that occupation ceases having a major role in determining male identity development around midlife, while the roles of interpersonal, hedonic, and spiritual factors become more prominent. Support was found for an ecological approach to the study of lifespan human development. (Author/NB)

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Midlife and Midcareer Transitional Factors: Precursors of Successful Aging[1]

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Abstract

This paper reviews previous adult development research, presents a model of midlife and midcareer development, and details the results of a survey of 584 middle aged men in middle management positions. Analyses indicated support for three of four hypotheses concerning the relationship between midlife and midcareer processes. Five factors were identified as possible precursors of successful aging attitudes. The results suggest that occupation ceases having a major role in determining male identity development around midlife, while the role of interpersonal, hedonic and spiritual factors becomes more prominent. Support is found for an ecological approach to the study of lifespan human development.

Key words: Developmental theory, Middle age, Middle management, Midlife transition, Male lifespan development.

In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of development in old age we need to study the developmental processes influencing midlife development and how these processes set the stage for the geriatric period. Research on middle age is only beginning to emerge as a field (Chiriboga, 1983), and takes its place with the other major divisions of lifespan human development: childhood, young adulthood, and late adulthood (old age). Relatively neglected has been the task of identifying developmental linkages between the adult and the late adult (geriatric) periods.

One of the earliest models of lifespan development was presented by Jung (1933). The third stage of his four-stage model, midlife, begins around age forty and is characterized by a maturing consciousness. The mechanism of action in his model is the human need to problem-solve, the outcome of which is further development of consciousness in old age. A more elaborate eight-stage model, proposed by Erikson (1950), spanning infancy through old age, postulated stage-appropriate developmental tasks as psychological imperatives. The mechanism of action is the struggle to master these tasks, with psychological stage development as the outcome.

Since Erikson no one has proposed a comprehensive lifespan model of adult psychological development which identifies mechanisms of development and predicts outcome successes based on earlier task completion. Certain studies of adult development confine their perspective to middle adulthood and do not trace development into old age (Farrell & Rosenberg, 1981; Gould, 1972, 1978; Lowenthal, Thurnher & Chiriboga, 1975; Vaillant, 1977). Other studies present

a description of middle age but do not describe developmental processes (Levinson, 1978a, 1978b; Tamir 1982a, 1982b). Some studies provide only a partial description of adult development (Mass & Kuppers, 1977), while others do not present a predictive model of develoment (Neugarten, 1968).

The research presented here examined middle adulthood as a developmental process with outcomes predictive of development into old age. We set out to examine adult psychological and career development from an ecological perspective that takes into consideration factors that influence and modify self-perception, values, identity and social interaction. Our study examined demographic, attitudinal, marital, parenting, physiological, psychological, and spiritual features of middle aged men, but especially focused on career dynamics, since work is so influential in men's early adult development, and the lowering of the job as a priority during midlife has been reported (Boylan, 1984, Levinson, 1978b; Tamir, 1982a). Intrapsychic, interpersonal, ecological and biological factors are all considered. Because we wished to further examine the male career development findings of earlier researchers (Levinson, 1978b; Vaillant, 1977), we confined our research to men. Middle managers were selected for this study because this group has not previously been the focus of adult development research yet were appropriate to Levinsons' (1978) notion of confronting the dream, yet thus afforded a contrast sample for testing developmental hpotheses of previous researchers. The foci of our research were five of the developmental tasks of middle

adulthood involving important adaptive decision-making: (1) confrontation with the dream of top occupation attainment at midlife and adjustment to current career reality; (2) adjustment, as necessary, of achievement motivation to promote realistic goal attainment; (3) adjustment as needed of psychological energy expenditure so as to direct the energy displaced from career to other goals; (4) employment of palliative resources to mitigate stresses often experienced during midlife and midcareer transitions, and (5) integrating midlife development adaptations to optimize the transition into old age.

Our study examines four hypotheses: (1) by midlife only a minority of middle managers still maintain a dream of top occupational attainment, the majority having abandoned this ideal goal; (2) the majority of middle managers who do not really expect top occupational attainment shift their achievement motivation from job advancement to job mastery within their current occupational niche; (3) career involvement declines by middle life, while attention to community service or personal recreation increases; and (4) the majority of middle managers experience some midlife transition stress which is buffered when social support is both available and satisfactory. Additionally, we examined the question: What variables are most powerfully associated with successful aging attitude?

Method

Subjects. The subjects were 1,026 men between the ages of 38 and 49 ($\bar{X}$ = 44.4), who were currently employed in positions of

middle management in California state government. Of these 584 (57%) provided complete responses and constituted the sample analyzed. Every major department of state government was represented. The sample was homogenous in terms of career success, yet represented a broad spectrum of occupations, including blue collar, white collar and professional fields--law enforcement, traffic, engineering, counseling, data processing, education, water treatment, and many others. Both lower and upper mid-management ranges were represented. A diversity of educational levels, racial and ethnic backgrounds and lifestyles made up the sample.

Materials. Our survey instrument contained 94 multiple choice and Likert-scale questions, measuring demographic and occupational attributes, partner, family, parental, and social relationships, and physiological, psychological, cultural and transpersonal characteristics. Several of the questions used retrospective comparisons, which permitted identification of possible contrasts with current time responses.[3]

Procedure. We contacted a representative of the State Personnel Board who assisted in developing an operational definition of middle manager that would allow us to target middle management as officially designated by the State of California. State Personnel also assisted in developing a list of classifications that encompassed middle management. We obtained from State Personnel a mailing list of state employees within the definitional parameters and consistent with the age range of the study. On June 15, 1984, 2,000 survey packets were mailed out. Mailings returned because of obsolete address were remailed during a subsequent five week period.

Results. Our study found confirmation for our first hypothesis: By midlife only a minority of middle managers still maintain a dream of top occupational attainment, the majority having abandoned this goal. Only 31% of the middle managers reported expectation of top occupational position. Nevertheless, almost half (47%) fantasize about attaining such a position. We found support for a shift in realistic career expectation during middle adulthood. The relationship between the measures of actual career expectation and age (r (584) = .10, p <.01), indicated that such expectation lowers with age. Change was found to be positively associated with higher career goals over the past decade (r (584) = .14, p <.001), or reporting that a midlife transition has affected one's career decisions (r (584) = .14, p <.001).

When measures of the middle managers' ages, career position, mentor experience, education, mate and friend resources, income and career goal changing were subjected to regression analysis using straightforward entry, six emerged as strongest predictors of high career expecation. These predictors were: age (F (1,582) = 5.49, p <.05), years of education (F (2,581) = 7.67, p <.001) career goal change (F (3,580) = 7.49, p <.01), income (F (4,579) = 7.59, p <.01), current career position (F (5,578) = 12.57, p <.001), and friend's supportiveness (F (6,577) = 4.05, p <.05).

The second hypothesis that the majority of middle managers who do not really expect top occupational attainment shift their achievement motivation from job advancement to job mastery within their current occupational niche, was also confirmed. The majority

(58%) of the managers did not expect further career advancement. This subgrouping of managers whose careers were felt to have topped out were more likely to rank work as a lower priority in their lives (r (584) = .17, p <.001). While for the entire sample of middle managers sutdied there was a parallel direction to their idealized career aspirations and their realistic career goal expectations (r (584) = .58, p <.001), for this subsample of topped-out managers an inverse correlation (r (584) = -.66, p <.001) was found. This suggests that this group of managers tend to have lower ideal career aspirations. As a group they report that their career goals have lowered over the past 10 years. Yet 70% of these topped-out managers report a primary work motive within the job mastery domain, e.g., "do a good job" or "succeed at a challenging assignment." This subgrouping of managers were analyzed using regression procedure with five trial predictors: education, career goal change, length of time at current job, priority of work in one's life and whether a job change was contemplated. Of these, three emerged as significant predictors: education (F (1,582) = 15.99, p <.001), change in job being contemplated (F (3,580) = 17.67, p <.001), and priority of work in one's life (F (4,579) = 14.50, p <.001). The direction of the predictions were as follows. The more educated these topped-out managers were, the lower they tended to estimate their ultimate career attainment. There was a direct relationship between the nearness of a contemplated job change and the lower end of career attainment expectations. Those who tended to rank work a a high priority in their lives also tended to have

lower expectations for their careers. Overall we concluded that the topped-out managers had lowered their career expectations over the past decade, retained work as a life priority, and were motivated at work by job mastery desire.

We found partial confirmation for our third hypothesis: Career involvement declines by middle life while attention to community service or personal recreation increases. Regression analysis reavealed a consistent relationship between age and decline in career involvement across both measures examined. Older mid-managers were less likely to have changed their career goals over the past 10 years, F (1,582) = 4.5, p <.05. However, if they experienced a life transition, they were more likely to have changed career goals, F (2,581) = 7.77, p <.001. Older managers were also more likely to report a lower priority for work in their lives, F (1,582) = 7.67, p <.01.

Community service did not increase during midlife, in contrast to part of our third hypothesis. The older a manager was, the fewer hours were spent in community service (r (584) = .14, p <.001).

Regression analysis illuminated the relationships between changes in recreational patterns and community service and the amount of time spent in various forms of recreation. A reduction of hours in community service predicted increased time spent in social interaction recreation, F (4,579) = 5.88, p <.05. The majority of managers (63%) reported a change in recreational patterns, and this change predicted an increase in time spent in active recreation

(F (3,580) = 35.09, p <.0001) and, to a more modest degree, time spent in social interaction recreation (F (3,580) = 12.68, p <.001). We found that there was a significant relationship between the trend of reduction of time in community service and increased time in passive individual recreation, F (4,579) = 5.71, p <.05. Thus, we found a reduction in both career and community involvement across middle adulthood, and a trend towards increased time spent in recreation, although not necessarily in a zero-sum model.

Confirmation was found for both parts of the fourth hypothesis: The majority of middle managers experience some midlife transition stress which is buffered when social support is both available and satisfactory.

The majority (61%) of the men of our sample acknowledged that they were or had been in a life transition. Two-thirds of these further identified this as a "midlife transition/crisis." Of the latter, 94% said that the transition affected their self-image. Additional confirmation that midlife is experienced as stressful was found in the reporting of physical changes over the past 16 years, the negative values of various change measures ranging from 51-90% of respondents. To test the second part of this fourth hypothesis we examined the relationships of various stressor measures and social support measures on two quality of life measures, curent life satisfaction and sense of life security. All of the stressor measures were negatively related to the quality of life measures, while all of the social support measures had a positive relationship

to the quality of life measures. In examining specifically the proposed buffering effect of social support on stressors we developed two interactive measures. The first interactive variable measured the net influence of the interaction of the midlife transition stressor variable with the mate support measure. The second interactive variable measured the net influence of the interaction of the midlife transition measure with the measure of adequate friend support.

Multiple regression analysis of three models, each incorporating a life quality measure (current life evaluation, respect by peers, sense of life security), provided confirmation of the palliative effect of social support on midlife stressors. In the first model current life satisfaction was predicted by: the buffering effect of adequate friend network on the midlife transition stressor, F (1,583) = 21.21, p <.0001, having supportive friends, F (2,582) = 12.99, p <.001, mate support F (3,579) = 10.64, p <.001, and the buffering effect of mate support on midlife transition, F (5,579) = 7.63, p <.01. In the second model respect by peers was significantly predicated by: having supportive friends, F (2,582) = 18.38, p <.0001, and mate support, F (3,581) = 8.70, p <. 01. Our third measure of life quality, sense of life security, was positively predicated by all four support and buffering variables, and negatively predicted by the midlife transition measure, as shown in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Thus, while the experience of middle age as a time of life transition was widespread, the there were multiple indicators that this transition is accompanied by subjectively experienced stressors, the men of our study generally felt good about their lives if they had the support of a mate and friends.

Our final examination sought to identify the variables strongly associated with a successful aging attitude. Successful aging attitude is defined for our study as a developmental, dynamic, and subjectively reportable process in which a person accepts his/her own personal aging and the future milieu in which he/she will function in a generally positive way. Two measures were used to operationalize this definition. The first was the respondent's current attitude towards old age, whether they looked forward to it. The second was their attitude towards the future in general, whether it was viewed positively. Measures of demographic status, stress, and support were examined in an effort to identify predictors of successful aging. Measures included: current life evaluation, work status, spousal and parental functioning, social and friend network functioning, and positive spiritual perspective on life.

These measures were first used as criterion variables to predict current attitude towards one's personal old age, using straightforward regression analysis. The results are displayed in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

Four measures predicted a positive attitude towards one's own personal aging: positive spiritual perspective on life, respect from one's social peers, a positive evaluation of one's current life, and having a satisfactory current relationship with one's children.

The same set of measures were used in a second regression analysis to discover predictors of positive attitude towards the general future. The results are shown in Table 3.

Insert Table 3 about here

In the second model, two predictors emerged as statistically significant: overall positive evaluation of one's current life, and having satisfying emotional support from friends. Because our study identified two distinct sets of significant predictors, it appears that there are two separate dimensions to successful aging attitude: one's view of how aging will affect one personally, and one's view of how the future will be in which one will have to life out his/her life.

Discussion

We believe that the four generally confirmed hypotheses have important implications for an improved understanding of midlife and midcareer developmental processes. And the identification of five precursors of successful aging attitude further improves our understanding of how processes in midlife help determine the course into old age. The confirmation found for our four hypotheses lends

support for the appropriateness of the five developmental tasks we proposed for middle adulthood: (1) confrontation with the dream of top occupational attainment and adjustment as needed; (2) adjustment as necessary of achievement motivation to conform to current occupational reality; (3) adjustment as needed of psychological energy expenditure to direct any energy displaced from career to other goals; (4) employment of palliative resources to mitigate stresses frequently attendant on midlife and midcareer transitions, and (5) integration of midlife adaptations to optimize the transition into old age.

Our research found support for the study of adult development from an ecological perspective in which psychological, interpersonal, environmental and biological factors are all considered. It was our experience that such an ecological approach to this study facilitated the identification of contributing influences on developmental process from several domains.

This study provides further confirmation of Levinson's (1978) hypothesis that the dream of top career attainment is frequently confronted realistically in midlife. This study also identifies job mastery as the locus where achievement motivation energy is often displaced when career upward mobility is frustrated. This suggests that middle aged men remain generally occupationally active regardless of the success of their career aspirations. However, our data also revealed a pattern of decline in career involvement over middle age. Yet the subjects of our study became more involved in recreation, particularly recreation requiring personal energy and

involvement. It is tempting to suggest a compensatory mechanism at work here, although the evidence for such from our study was inconclusive. Nevertheless, it appears that the hedonic capacity, or at least its exercise, increases for men in middle age.

The study found support for the generalized reported experience of a life transition around middle age reported by Gould (1972), Vaillant (1977), and others. It also found support for the buffering effect of social support on the stresses (Pilisuk, 1982) frequently found during this developmental period. However, we do not assert that the men of our study consciously utilized social support to alleviate the stresses of the midlife period. Further study will be required to substantiate any such possible relationship.

The five precursors of successful aging attitude represent the psychological, interpersonal, environmental and transpersonal domains and suggest that attitude towards aging is a holistically developed construct. This further supports the utility of the ecological perspective in the study of adult and late adult development.

Because our research population was restricted to middle aged males, and because their occupational status was middle management in the state government workforce, caution should be used in generalizing these conclusions to other populations. Nevertheless, the congruence of a number of our results with those of other researchers facilitates the presenting of our findings as an additional contribution to adult development theory.

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Footnotes

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[3]A copy of the survey instrument is available from the authors upon request.

Table 1

Regression Coefficients of Predictive

Measures of Sense of Life Security

Control Variables	b	R^{2}*	F	Signif of F
Interaction of friends and transition	.08		24.22	.001
Supportive friends	.14		12.82	.001
Midlife transition stressor	-.07		6.54	.01
Interaction of mate and transition	.03		4.91	.05
Mate support	.08	.13	4.69	.05

*R^{2} values are cumulative.

Table 2

Regression Coefficients of Predictive Measures

of Attitude Towards One's Personal Old Age

Control Variables	b	R^{2}*	F	Signif of F
Postive spiritual perspective	.13		17.45	.0001
Respect from social peers	.17		11.37	.001
Current life evaluation	.06		6.89	.001
Satisfactory relationships w/offspring	.10	.12	6.52	.01

*R^{2} values are cumulative

Table 3

Regression Coefficients of Postive Predictors

of Attitude Towards the General Future

Control Variables	b	R^{2}*	F	Signif of F
Current life evaluation	.08		23.88	.0001
Friends support	.07	.11	4.72	.05

*R^{2} values are cumulative.